How Museums Have Adapted to Life during COVID-19

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By Erika Kelley

In late 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was made aware of several cases of pneumonia with unknown causes centered in Wuhan, China. On February 11, 2020, the WHO announced the official name for the new illness, novel coronavirus-2019, otherwise known as COVID-19. COVID-19 eventually spread and was officially declared a pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020. The response to the virus drastically changed how the entire world functioned and forced everyone to adapt to living life and operating online.

This article focuses on how four museums have been affected by COVID-19, how they have adapted to the changes since the pandemic, and how the staff adjusted. The staff adjustments include their adaptations to working online, how operations have changed, and how they plan to function in the future when COVID-19 regulations and guidelines are lifted. Specifically, using information from interviews with museum staff

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members from four different institutions, this article will explore how the California-based Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art has adapted to COVID-19 and compare their effort to three other institutions: the J. Paul Getty Museum (California), the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East (Massachusetts), and the British Museum (London).

While information concerning COVID-19’s severity had been circulating since January 2020, the WHO officially declared the outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Before the WHO’s announcement, the Wuhan government in China began implementing a variety of different safety measures as early as January 23, 2020, to combat the spread of COVID-19: an area-based home quarantine, the closure of all public transportation, enforced cancellation of large gatherings, and government-provided food and medical supplies for the people.

The United States announced that the federal government would take a “back-up” role concerning COVID-19, with then-President Donald Trump saying, “we’re a backup. Remember, we’re a backup. We’re the greatest backup that ever existed for the states.” This effectively placed primary responsibility for containing and combating the virus on state governments rather than the federal government. These laws and restrictions varied greatly between all 50 states due to the different governing bodies that supervised them. Moreover, other countries, such as England,

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7 Ibid.
each responded differently to the pandemic. Unlike America, the British central government took a more prominent role in how the country handled COVID-19. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson specifically said that the government had to step in and ask people to stay home for 12 weeks initially, as quarantining was crucial for saving “literally thousands of lives” and “defeating the virus.”

California, Museums, and COVID-19

On March 19, 2020, eight days after the official WHO declaration, California’s governor, Gavin Newsom, ordered a two-week stay-at-home order for the entire state and population of California. Newsom’s executive order stated that the enactment of this stay-at-home mandate was due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in California. Furthermore, the gubernatorial order stated that the mandate’s goals were “to preserve the public health and safety, and ensure the healthcare delivery system is capable of serving all, and prioritizing those at the highest risk and vulnerability.” There were originally sixteen different sectors excluded from this stay-at-home order ranging from emergency services to grocery store workers to dam workers. These professional sectors became known as “essential services” because the California government ensured that the state would continue to operate and run smoothly.

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if these positions stayed open. In contrast, the designation of everything not in the sixteen specified sectors became monikered “nonessential services,” and thousands of different businesses ranging from restaurants to schools were closed with no definite reopening date.

These two weeks, however, turned into months as the COVID-19 situation did not improve. As of March 2021, California has been on a stay-at-home order for over a year now with slight variations to what can be open and what cannot. These updated regulations and guidelines came with the installation of Governor Newsom’s COVID-19 tier system that dictated what industries could open based on the county’s COVID-19 statistics.

Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art (RAFFMA)

San Bernardino County, the location of the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art (RAFFMA), is currently in the moderate (orange) tier, allowing businesses to begin operating with modifications depending on the business type. While many other institutions have announced or are in the process of announcing reopening dates, RAFFMA is one museum that has yet to return to “normal” operations since the pandemic began. Thus, its doors continue to be closed to the general public.

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RAFFMA is a small art museum located on the California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) campus. RAFFMA first opened its doors in 1996 and was granted accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums in 2008. The American Alliance of Museums “offers a pathway of standards-based assessments and recognition programs” that ensure museums and institutions are operating at the highest quality regarding professionalism and public needs. RAFFMA’s accreditation means that it has met and continues to meet these standards and is professionally operating at a high level of excellence.

RAFFMA is an art museum that usually has two to three art exhibitions on display at a time; as of March 2020, the museum is currently displaying two on-site. The two exhibits are the “Personal to Political: Celebrating the Africa American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press” and RAFFMA’s permanent display which features an ancient Egyptian artifact exhibit entitled “Journey to the Beyond: Ancient Egyptians in the Pursuit of Eternity.” Another exhibition annually shown at RAFFMA is The Masters of Fine Arts Student Exhibition which is usually displayed at the end of each semester. RAFFMA does more than just display exhibits, however. Over the years, RAFFMA has consistently been the site for several different academic lectures ranging from topics revolving around art and history and activities like book signings.

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or calligraphy classes. RAFFMA has also developed several annual events like RAFFMA-ween or its Kid's Discover Egypt summer camp, which is a more community-based program that encourages participation from all age levels.

RAFFMA’s staff includes Eva Kirsh, the director; John Fleeman, the exhibition designer; Michael Beckly, the exhibition preparator; Miranda Canseco, the marketing, membership, and engagement coordinator; Diego Irigoyen; the education and collections coordinator; Laura Muñoz, RAFFMA’s graphic designer; Bryan Kraemer, the resident Egyptologist; and several student assistants. Each staff member is a unique part of RAFFMA and is integral in ensuring the museum runs smoothly for all their guests to enjoy.

Due to its location, RAFFMA must adhere to both California’s guidelines and regulations and also CSUSB’s guidelines. This duality in policy meant that when the university decided to close to the public, RAFFMA also followed suit. CSUSB, with guidance from the California State University Chancellor’s Office, federal, state, and local health officials, announced that both campuses, San Bernardino and Palm Desert, would temporarily suspend all non-essential on-campus operations as of March 20, 2020.

Like California, CSUSB allowed essential campus functions to remain open, including services like the Obershaw Den Food Pantry and the Student Health Services. RAFFMA was not considered to be one of the “essential campus functions” and was closed to the public like the rest of the campus. However,

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rather than wait for the mandated closure on March 20, the RAFFMA staff decided that March 13 would be their last day physically working at the museum and the museum was officially closed to the public.  

It has been more than a year since RAFFMA closed its doors to the public, but this has not stopped the team from working together to bring RAFFMA to life virtually. Almost immediately after it closed to the public, RAFFMA and its team worked to create entertaining and exciting events that the student body and community could attend from the safety of their own homes. One of the first things RAFFMA’s staff did in the wake of the pandemic was the creation of the RAFFMA@Home initiative. The initiative’s ultimate goal was to continue to “create relevant and meaningful cultural experiences” for the community while still keeping everyone safe. These experiences included visual audio tours of RAFFMA’s past and present exhibitions, watching past recordings of lectures and events hosted by RAFFMA, and creating fun activities and coloring pages that could easily be completed by any age level. All of RAFFMA’s hard work and dedication for their RAFFMA @ Home initiative did not go unnoticed by the university. In 2020, RAFFMA’s staff was awarded CSUSB’s President’s Team Achievement Award. This award was given to RAFFMA as they exhibited a great sense of collaboration, innovation, responsiveness, service, and teamwork when faced with adversity.

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23 Diego Irigoyen (Education and Collections Coordinator at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021. Due to the changing nature of COVID-19, the museum staff were eventually allowed to go back to the museum and work on-site. During this time, the museum was not open to the public and only select staff members were able to physically be at the museum.


25 Ibid.

Like many other businesses and institutions, RAFFMA began using video conference platforms like Zoom when holding lectures, events and conducting meetings.\(^{27}\) This shift to online or virtual meetings also meant that RAFFMA did not have to completely shut out the public and could continue to educate them. In the year that RAFFMA has been closed, they have held dozens of events and lectures, ranging from an online symposium, featuring both international and national speakers, to an “Intro to Hieroglyphs” workshop.\(^{28}\)

Since RAFFMA’s events have been held online, they have also allowed people from all over the world to attend them. Most, if not all, of the past lectures and activities that RAFFMA hosted before the pandemic were physically held at the museum on campus. This limited the number of people able to come to those that were physically able to travel to the museum. With the use of Zoom, RAFFMA was no longer unreachable to people living on the East Coast or even internationally, which is seen most clearly in their most recent event that had 340 attendees registered with some watching all the way from Egypt and Italy.\(^{29}\) Anyone who hears about an event that RAFFMA is hosting can now attend, assuming they have the necessary equipment needed to attend virtually. This online format has allowed RAFFMA to hold lectures via Zoom and to develop more of their online content.

In addition to having events on Zoom, RAFFMA has utilized YouTube and the YouTube Premier feature for several of their events, allowing people without Zoom to attend RAFFMA’s events and return to them at any time.\(^{30}\) RAFFMA also started developing new content altogether during the pandemic with one


\(^{29}\) Miranda Canseco (Marketing, Membership, and Engagement Coordinator at RAFFMA), email message to author, April 15, 2021.

\(^{30}\) “RAFFMAsusb,” YouTube, accessed April 12, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZoEer_SRgAybO7FHHCGgMA.
example being the Art Hour Podcast that started during the Fall 2020 semester. This podcast gave RAFFMA a new platform where they could talk about art and connect with the community even more. The RAFFMA student assistants host this series where they are joined weekly by various guests; the focus of each episode varies greatly from misconceptions about ancient Egypt to common stereotypes in art careers.³¹

Eventually, California lessened its COVID-19 restrictions which meant more people could return to working “on-site”; this was extended to the CSUSB campus.³² While most of the previous guidelines and regulations were still in place, some of CSUSB’s and RAFFMA’s staff were allowed to come back to campus to work. The number of people allowed on campus and in RAFFMA was minimal, and they all had to follow stringent regulations and guidelines. Nevertheless, the RAFFMA team continued to make the museum function as efficiently and effectively as possible given the circumstances.³³ The work that they have been doing on campus has been incredibly educational and beneficial to the community.

While the mandated closures limited on-campus activity, RAFFMA workers continued to switch out exhibits once some restrictions were lifted in May 2020, to share new artifacts and pieces with the public virtually.³⁴ Part of RAFFMA’s on-campus work involved taking pictures or videos of what was on display in

³¹ “RAFFMAcusb,”
the museum that would later be turned into virtual tours. When RAFFMA closed to the public, the exhibit “Golden West? Jan Sawka’s California Dream” was being displayed. This exhibit, however, was only on loan to RAFFMA, so eventually, the staff had to go back to the museum and ship the contents of the exhibition to the next museum displaying it. Once the Jan Sawka exhibit was disassembled, RAFFMA was able to prepare their next exhibit, “Festival de Calaveras,” to be displayed in October 2020.35 This event took place during a time where California’s stay-at-home order was not as strict, so community members were able to sign-up to decorate a Calavera provided by RAFFMA, which would then be auctioned off as a way to raise money for scholarships.36 The museum was still closed to the general public at the time of the event, but RAFFMA was able to organize a safe drop-off/pick-up procedure that followed all of the state’s guidelines, which is how they were able to continue engaging with the community.

RAFFMA staff then dismantled the “Festival de Calaveras” exhibit and replaced it with the “Personal to Political: Celebrating the African American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press” that they displayed from February 2021 to April 2021 in recognition of Black History Month.37 While it might seem strange to set up multiple exhibits while the museum was still closed to the general public, RAFFMA did not let the closures stop the public from seeing what they displayed. Once the Calaveras had been returned to the museum, RAFFMA made YouTube videos displaying each

of the Calaveras individually, and community members were able to view the art created for this event virtually. RAFFMA successfully created virtual tours of both the “Golden West? Jan Sawka’s California Dream” exhibit as well as the “Personal to Political: Celebrating the African American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press.” These virtual tours allowed not only local community members, but anyone in the world to visit the museum and view the exhibit on display. Several videos, like the ones taken for the “Festival de Calaveras” event, were even uploaded to RAFFMA’s YouTube channel so that the community could view them for years to come.

Moreover, the RAFFMA team took on the daunting task of digitizing a large portion of their Egyptian artifacts by turning them into virtual 3-D objects, some of which have now been made available to the public. This undertaking was a time-consuming and laborious task that the staff is still working on perfecting. The ultimate goal of this project is to have a 3-D virtual tour that people can go through and actually “hold” and inspect thousands-of-years-old objects, which guests cannot do in a regular museum setting. This virtual tour, like the others, also allows people from all over the world to “visit” RAFFMA and see their collections “first-hand,” something they might never have been able to do before. In addition to these 3-D objects, RAFFMA also spotlighted certain artifacts from their collections and made videos discussing them in detail.

38 RAFFMA “Festival de Calaveras” YouTube, November 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaQehzPsRqnDDlnYdsJbLPLtptvMq-KEV.
39 RAFFMA Golden West virtual tour link: https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=BvL4CA1L5eE&mls=1; RAFFMA Personal to Political tour link: https://rocket.csusb.edu/raffma/.
40 “RAFFMACsusb,”
41 RAFFMA 3-D objects: https://sketchfab.com/raffmacsusb.
42 This is a task that I have personally been involved with as a student assistant working at RAFFMA.
While the RAFFMA team’s completed work has been nothing short of incredible, it does not reflect the actual sentiment that the RAFFMA staff had surrounding the pandemic and the closures. Like many others, RAFFMA’s staff was utterly shocked by the campus and museum closing. Miranda Canseco, the marketing, membership, and engagement coordinator at RAFFMA, says that her “initial reaction was disbelief. It was hard to wrap my head around that this was a reality and how long this would be for. We were all sent home to work with the thought that we would be back in 2 weeks max.” But they were able to quickly shift their focus to how they could bring the museum online. While the shift to operating the museum virtually came suddenly, Diego Irigoyen, RAFFMA’s education and collections coordinator, felt fine with the switch happening saying:

I had, prior to working at the museum, a lot of experience with media management and content creation so my thought was, we’ll do that [operating virtually] if we can’t have people at the museum. We can focus our attention on that and I felt comfortable with that so I wasn’t necessarily too worried.

This optimism, however, was not a sentiment that all his coworkers shared. John Fleeman, RAFFMA’s exhibition designer, says that:

I hated this idea. I hated this idea, not because I didn’t think it was a good idea. I think that we did it well and there are some things that are positive. But in the beginning my initial response was this is my nightmare… The one thing I really enjoy about my

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43 Miranda Canseco (Marketing, Membership, and Engagement Coordinator at RAFFMA), email message to author, April 15, 2021.
44 Diego Irigoyen (Education and Collections Coordinator at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021.
job is the creative collaboration that you have with the artists and curators, staff, the student assistants, and being able to lead a team and learn things from them and teach them—and being able to create that thing in the real physical world and see the impact it has on people.\(^\text{45}\)

The cancelations and closures upset Fleeman because they completely changed RAFFMA. Fleeman says that “instead of making things, we were canceling things. We went from a think, build, create, share to cancel, cancel, cancel” which is the opposite of what RAFFMA fostered and encouraged for the community.\(^\text{46}\)

RAFFMA’s director, Eva Kirsch, fell somewhat between the two sentiments, saying that while she and RAFFMA were already looking into developing their digital content and fostering these skills, they just were not prepared for the suddenness of the shift and how much time it would take to do it successfully.\(^\text{47}\) In contrast, the team has since been able to overcome the initial drawbacks COVID-19 produced. After a year of virtual operations, the RAFFMA team has worked together to overcome the challenges that the pandemic created. For Fleeman, this manifested in actually going out and researching how other museums were operating in states where museums were allowed to remain open and bringing that information back to better prepare himself for designing in a post-COVID-19 world in the future.\(^\text{48}\) For all of the staff, overcoming these challenges also included fostering new skills, ranging from interviewing artists to learning how to use 3-D equipment, and taking on new roles they were unaccustomed to at their original jobs at the museum. Ultimately, the COVID-19

\(^{45}\) John Fleeman (Exhibition Designer at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2021.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Eva Kirsch (Museum Director at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, April 6, 2021.

\(^{48}\) John Fleeman (Exhibition Designer at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2021.
pandemic took a toll on the RAFFMA employees, but they were able to overcome the initial setbacks and prosper in their wake.

The Getty Museums

Another museum that has had to adapt to the California COVID-19 closures is colloquially known as the Getty. The founder of the Getty was J. Paul Getty (1892–1976), a businessman, who viewed art as a “civilizing influence in society” and wanted to make it more accessible to the public.49 Starting in 1948, Getty gave pieces of his personal art collection to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until 1954, when the J. Paul Getty Museum opened officially.50

Since then, the Getty has evolved into a larger institution that features the Getty Villa, the Getty Center, the Getty Conservation Institute, the Getty Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Getty Research Institute, all of which are “dedicated to the presentation, conservation, and interpretation of the world’s artistic legacy.”51 As the general public’s concern for COVID-19 began to grow, Elizabeth Escamilla, the Getty’s assistant director for education and public programs, recalls that the Getty had started to make plans for how to operate safely. However, those plans quickly changed as COVID-19 became increasingly more severe, and Escamilla says that “it went from making those kinds of decisions to shutting down.”52

As the Getty transitioned to being virtual, Escamilla states that there were many initial drawbacks but the main two were the general transition to a virtual medium and questions on how to involve the general public:

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50 Ibid.
52 Elizabeth Escamilla (Assistant Director for Education and Public Programs at the Getty) in discussion with the author, April 8, 2021.
The transition to figuring out how to do a job that has been primarily an onsite physical job in a very specific place to taking that experience and figuring out how to make it a virtual experience with the same sort of level of engagement and quality and how to set up the physical equipment with laptops and printers and screens and how to do that and how to lay eggs with all of our other colleagues in order to produce something that was actually consumable by the public whether we’re talking K-12 students, teachers, the general public, art enthusiasts. The external side, audience side, especially with K-12 students is how do you outreach to that audience when they may not have the technology either the Wi-Fi capacity or the equipment, the tools, in order to engage with the museum.\textsuperscript{53}

This concern for the everyday museum-goer is especially prevalent for Escamilla. The Getty has many K-12 student visitors that attend Title-I schools, which means over fifty percent of the student population is low-income, and engaging in virtual programs is challenging for them as many of the students might not have access to the equipment needed to participate.\textsuperscript{54}

To overcome these drawbacks, the Getty launched a variety of different programs throughout the closure, like the Getty Virtual Art Explorations.\textsuperscript{55} This program better prepared the Getty to run virtual events and make the experience better or “special” for the audience, but ultimately “there was a significant learning curve.”\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} Elizabeth Escamilla (Assistant Director for Education and Public Programs at the Getty) in discussion with the author, April 8, 2021.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{56} Elizabeth Escamilla (Assistant Director for Education and Public Programs at the Getty) in discussion with the author, April 8, 2021.
In addition to the pilot, the Getty has also begun using video conference software like Zoom to host lectures, webinars, and newly created conversation-based activities. Examples of these activities include *Art Break* and *Getty Get Together*, which foster the audience’s connection with the Getty and art even when they cannot physically be there. In addition to Zoom, the Getty has also created several social media challenges and has even recreated ancient plays, making them available online for the general public to view at their convenience.

The Getty has also strived, and succeeded in, keeping all of their program free, which Escamilla sees as a “way to keep Getty fans sort of engaged with us during this stay at home.” Escamilla says that the Getty has also been collaborating with other Los Angeles-based organizations, thinking about the larger community during these trying times, and has been working together “to help spotlight the work that they [the Los Angeles-based organizations] do,” which has encouraged engagement and involvement with Getty and the larger Los Angeles community.

Nevertheless, it is not just the local community that has been “visiting” the Getty while it has been closed. Like RAFFMA, the Getty’s lectures and other virtual content have also been appealing to international audiences and communities. In fact, the Getty has now begun considering time differences and when the best time for the whole world would be, not just the local community, when scheduling their events. While their virtual content has been their primary focus, the Getty has been planning for reopening since they closed. This process is not entirely new to them since they have closed and reopened many of their institutions before. Escamilla says that they have a plan for how
every aspect of the Getty museums, whether it be ticketing or parking, will operate once they reopen.

Moreover, she indicated that they plan on testing in a “pre-opening” period dedicated to ensuring that the institution is safe for the public and follows California’s regulations and guidelines.\(^{62}\) Escamilla also says that “there is no way that we will go back to only being onsite” and that they will incorporate and continue to use the virtual content they have created once the museum reopens.\(^{63}\) Ultimately, both RAFFMA and the Getty had very similar experiences to what operating was like during the COVID-19 pandemic and what they plan on doing once they reopen.

**Massachusetts, London, and COVID-19**

California and its museums were not the only ones affected by the COVID-19 closures. With the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments passed new guidelines and regulations on how to deal with the virus. The Massachusetts state government and the British government were some of these agencies that passed guidelines and regulations that affected how museums operated. While this is not a comprehensive analysis of how all museums in Massachusetts and England operated during the COVID-19 closures, this section will illustrate how different museums adapted to COVID-19 and compare them to how museums in California operated during this time.

**Massachusetts: The Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East (HMANE)**

Similar to how California responded, on March 10, 2020, Massachusetts’ Governor and lieutenant Governor, Charlie Baker and Karyn Polito, declared a state of emergency in

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\(^{62}\) Elizabeth Escamilla (Assistant Director for Education and Public Programs at the Getty) in discussion with the author, April 8, 2021.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.
While this state of emergency allowed certain industries to stay open, museums were not. This meant that the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East (HMANE) and its sister museums (the Harvard Museum of Natural History, the Peabody Museum of Archeology & Ethnology, and the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments) all had to close their doors to the public in March 2020.

The HMANE is one of four different museums housed on the Harvard campus in Massachusetts. This museum was initially founded in 1889 as the Harvard Semitic Museum, and its main goal was to be “a teaching tool to study the ancient histories and cultures of people who spoke Semitic languages, among the Israelites, Moabites, Arbas, Babylonians, and Phoenicians.” The museum’s name was later changed in 2020 to more accurately reflect the diversity seen in the museum’s collections. Since the location of this museum is on a university campus, it has to follow state and college COVID-19 regulations and guidelines, much like RAFFMA. This meant that when Harvard announced that the campus was closing in late March, the HMANE simultaneously closed its door to the public.

Before this closure, however, the four museums worked very similarly to RAFFMA as they all held different lectures, events, gave tours, and had a multitude of activities that the community could attend and enjoy. In addition to this, the museum had several classrooms and faculty offices attached to it which meant that a typical day at the museum could include several students walking throughout it in addition to other guests and staff members. When the information regarding COVID-19 first began circulating, the HMANE had several talks about what safety precautions they could take to operate safely.

However, Gregory Adam Middleton, the HMANE’s museums coordinator, says that it was almost impossible to do so because the information came in so rapidly and changed so quickly. Middleton says that the official last day the museum was open to the public was March 13, 2020, but the week leading up to that day showed a visible change in the number of people visiting the museum whether it be guests, students, or faculty. Like RAFFMA and the Getty, Middleton says that there were many initial drawbacks to the museum closing. For the HMANE, these drawbacks manifested in the fact that there was an unfinished exhibit sitting in the museum. Anxiety naturally crept over the museum’s staff as they inevitably began questioning the overall security of the museum, the faculty offices, and who would have access to the building.

Unlike RAFFMA, the HMANE had already started developing its online content before the COVID-19 pandemic as Middleton states:

70 Gregory Adam Middleton (Museum Coordinator at HMANE) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
We have a lot of digital assets, and [we had] started that process years ago. A few years ago, we got into the 3-D scanning game relatively early with a very old, ancient scanner. It’s actually a turntable so you would sit an object on it and turn and use lasers and draw all the vertices and scan. So, we lucked out really on having a lot of digital assets. We had started moving a lot of our archives to cloud storage instead of hard drives. So, just by accident we almost had a lot of things that we could use.  

Like RAFFMA, the HMANE made their virtual tour and digital objects available to the public upon completion. Since they began digitizing sooner than RAFFMA, they were better prepared, and it was not as steep of a learning curve for the Harvard museum staff. In addition to the digital content, HMANE and its sister museums also made several changes to ensure that the community stayed together and engaged with them. According to Middleton, along with moving their lectures and webinars to Zoom, they also started using and embracing platforms like Skype, YouTube, and Google Group. Like RAFFMA, HMANE also created coloring pages and started a podcast as an alternative way to ensure that the community stayed engaged with the museum and the content they were producing.  

Regarding how the museum will run when it is safe to do so, Middleton contends that there are no current plans as there is so much variability that comes with it. As of now, Middleton says that there is no set day as to when even the staff can come back to work, though they hope sometime in the

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74 Gregory Adam Middleton (Museum Coordinator at HMANE) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021.
75 HMANE virtual tour link: https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=bS17YNKCggy&referrer=https://hmane.harvard.edu; HMANE 3-D object link: https://sketchfab.com/hmane/collections.
76 Gregory Adam Middleton (Museum Coordinator at HMANE) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021.
77 Ibid.
summer, it ultimately depends on when they receive permission from the campus.\(^{78}\) He does say that he believes that, when the museums reopen, they will continue to use and incorporate the digital content they made like the digital objects, virtual tours, the podcast, and coloring pages. Nonetheless, Middleton says that the museum wants to retain and continue to use some of the museum’s on-site pre-COVID features on special occasions like the possible use of the exhibit’s touch screens, which would encourage more hands-on learning and engagement.\(^{79}\)

*The British Museum*

It was not just American museums that had to adapt and change during the COVID-19 pandemic. The British Museum, said to be the first national public museum with its doors opening in 1759, is visited by thousands of people each year and houses thousands of objects and artifacts from all corners of the Earth.\(^{80}\) Unlike RAFFMA or HMANE, the British Museum, like the Getty, is not connected to any university campuses. Nonetheless, it still must adhere to the COVID-19 guidelines and regulations set by the British Parliament. This meant that when Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the stay-at-home order on March 23, 2020, and closed all non-essential business, the British Museum had to close its doors to the public as well.\(^{81}\) However, the British Museum has already begun taking precautions before this point. Stuart Frost, the head of interpretation and volunteers, says that “in the run-up to lockdown we did stop some activities where

\(^{78}\) Gregory Adam Middleton (Museum Coordinator at HMANE) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021.

\(^{79}\) Ibid.


there was a risk of transmission through touch.”

The museum indeed closed to the public on March 18, 2020, and staff began working from home at that point. Frost also points out that, unfortunately, the closure caused the furlough of many staff members between April and September of 2020. In addition to reduced staff, the museum also suffered “the loss of income from visitor donation, ticket sales, shop sales, and the cafes and restaurants” and the added stress and uncertainty that these financial problems brought.

Unlike the other museums mentioned, the British Museum reopened on August 27, 2020, but it was “the ground-floor only with a one-way route, reduced capacity and social distancing.” However, this reopening was short-lived as the museum was forced to close and reopen several more times between August and December 16, 2020, when the museum was officially “closed again as the UK went back into lockdown.” While the museum has operated onsite in some capacity, Frost says that “effectively the Museum has become the website,” which has encouraged the staff to use social media and other virtual outlets to engage with both the local and international communities.

Frost believes that while holding online events is important during the pandemic, they do not have the same “magic” that on-site events possess because the audience does not get the same engaging experience.

It has since been confirmed that museums can reopen in May 2021 in England, and Frost says that the British Museum plans on originally reopening with a “one-way route and social

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82 Stuart Frost (Head of Interpretation and Volunteers), email message to author, March 23, 2021.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
distancing measures.” However, the museum will “remove the one-way route as soon as it is possible to do so, that way people can go back to visiting the museum in the manner of their choosing” and begin hosting on-site events, hopefully, by the winter of 2021. While the museum is excited to return to normal, Frost says that they will most likely “continue to run events online as well as onsite to have a greater impact and reach. It’ll be a mixed model. If we just go back to what we did before the pandemic, it will be a missed opportunity to improve.”

How the British Museum dealt with COVID-19 varies slightly from the museums located in the United States; however, they still share many similarities. Like RAFFMA, the Getty, and HMANE, the British Museum closed to the public in response to the COVID-19 pandemics and had to learn how to operate virtually for some time. They all seemed to have taken advantage of virtual programming, which ultimately allowed them to reach more people worldwide. They also all had to learn how to reopen and operate safely under the new COVID-19 guidelines, but some of them have had more opportunities to practice these new operations depending on their local governments.

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90 Stuart Frost (Head of Interpretation and Volunteers at the British Museum), email message to author, March 23, 2021.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
Conclusion

While most museums were able to successfully adapt to the pandemic’s closures, there were still many obstacles that the COVID-19 lockdowns exacerbated and highlighted. Almost every person interviewed at some point said that one of the most challenging parts about being online was the lack of communication and interaction with their coworkers and the public. Irigoyen, RAFFMA’s education and collections coordinator, states that one of his favorite parts about working in a museum was talking and the social interactions between himself, the public, and his coworkers.93 Frost, the British Museum’s head of interpretation and volunteers, echoes this sentiment by stating that staff working from home miss the social interaction and the chats in the office.94 At the same time, Kirsch, RAFFMA’s director, takes this feeling a step further in saying that she genuinely feels isolated from her staff, other people, and even the objects in the collections themselves.95 Canseco, RAFFMA’s marketing, membership, and engagement coordinator, specifically points out the “disconnect from their older audience” who are not as technologically literate and many of whom are unable to attend the online events.96

Kirsch also points out that not every museum or institution could survive the closures, saying that some of them have gone

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93 Diego Irigoyen (Education and Collections Coordinator at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, March 18, 2021.
94 Stuart Frost (Head of Interpretation and Volunteers at the British Museum), email message to author, March 23, 2021.
95 Eva Kirsch (Museum Director at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, April 6, 2021.
96 Miranda Canseco (Marketing, Membership, and Engagement Coordinator at RAFFMA), email message to author, April 15, 2021.
“dormant” or closed their doors permanently. These closures, in turn, are prompting a dramatic shift in how museums operate, what happens with their collections, and the very nature or definition of a museum. Kirsch does note that these changes have been a long time coming and have essentially been ignored with the idea that ignorance is bliss; the COVID-19 pandemic just made the pre-COVID-19 issues more apparent and accelerated the consequences of it. Specifically, in their 2021 TrendsWatch, the American Alliance of Museums cited preexisting and present financial issues that museums face as well as the inequality seen in the communities museums serve in regards to wealth, power, and race. The American Alliance of Museums uses this report to highlight some of the challenges or issues that have persisted within United States society, how museums have contributed to these issues, and potential ways museums can respond or change to better address them.

However, Fleeman, RAFFMA’s Exhibition Designer, points out that the problems that COVID-19 produced do not stop with the museum and its staff. According to Fleeman, while

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97 “Crowdsourcing a Database of Permanent Museum Closings”, The American Alliance of Museums, January 8, 2021, https://www.aam-us.org/2021/01/08/crowdsourcing-a-database-of-permanent-museum-closings/. The American Alliance of Museums has put together a spreadsheet of museums that have closed recently. Not all of these museums cite COVID-19 as the reason for closing, but a large majority of them do. To view the spreadsheet, visit: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/17u5ik2rBoGzGnCF5yUdpcL0WVj6D DSPWKPvLWtB-wTw/edit#gid=1582367238.

98 Eva Kirsch (Museum Director at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, April 6, 2021.

99 Ibid.


101 “Center for the Future of Museums - Navigating a Disrupted Future.”
COVID-19 has brought some positive changes, it is selfish to only think about how the closures affected the museums and not focus on the larger communities that relied on the museum’s visitors like the “restaurants, cafes, bookstores, the shops,” and the employees that work there.102 Many of the larger-scale museums will recover and open again, but community-based organizations and institutions will forever be changed and might never recover from the pandemic. Escamilla, Assistant Director for Education and Public Programs at the Getty, also echoes this sentiment, saying that now the museums and the world will be “reopening to a public that has gone through a mass amount of trauma that will be extremely difficult to process and move on from.”103 While museums like RAFFMA, the Getty, HMANE, and the British Museum have been able to survive and operate virtually, the toll that the closures and the pandemic have taken on its staff and their community is still unknown and the consequences are still yet to be determined.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed how museums around the world operate. The old way of educating and entertaining guests in person was no longer a viable option, forcing museum staff to adapt and learn a new way of operating. These four museums all had to embrace and create virtual content as it was the only way they could continue to engage with the community. While working from home and operating their business virtually gave them time to develop their new content and foster new skills, it ultimately brought about many challenges. There were various learning curves, internal issues like finances or staffing, and external issues facing the larger community that affected how many museums operate and function. Beyond that, as Kirsh points out, the COVID-19 closures highlighted some very serious dangers that museums face in the era of COVID-19 that

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102 John Fleeman (Exhibition Designer at RAFFMA) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2021.
103 Elizabeth Escamilla (Assistant Director for Education and Public Programs at the Getty) in discussion with the author, April 8, 2021.
have existed long before the virus and that these issues will continue to persist if not taken care of effectively. The COVID-19 pandemic completely changed how museums like RAFFMA, the Getty, HMANE, and the British Museum operate both on-site and regarding their staffs’ work, but they have been able to overcome these changes and will most likely continue to evolve and improve their institutions long after COVID-19 poses a threat to in-person meetings.
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Erika Kelley is a third-year undergraduate student at California State University, San Bernardino. She is majoring in Public History and minoring in Anthropology. After graduating, Erika hopes to continue her education by obtaining a master’s degree. She enjoys learning about ancient civilizations and museum studies. In her free time, she enjoys being outside in nature and visiting different museums and botanical gardens with her friends and family. Erika would like to thank her family for supporting her and her endeavors. She would also like to thank the journal editors and the rest of the team for all their hard work and dedication.